



## SAMPLE EDITORIAL

### FIRE IN VACANT BUILDINGS: A NATIONAL PROBLEM WITH A LOCAL SOLUTION

Just a year ago a pair of firefighters entered a burning vacant warehouse in Worcester, Massachusetts to rescue two homeless people reportedly living there. A short time later each radioed they were lost in heavy smoke and were running out of air. Four more fighters rushed in to rescue them. All six died in the next few minutes.

What happened in Worcester stunned this nation and focused attention, again, on the horrendous hazard of unsecured vacant buildings. The theme of this year's Arson Awareness Week, *It Can Happen Anywhere*, is meant to convey that message; anywhere a vacant building exists there is a very real danger another Worcester could occur.

We all know vacant buildings often become sites for serious felony crimes. Only the poor and elderly usually have first-hand experience with the depressing effect dilapidated buildings have on their neighborhood or how quickly such buildings become magnets for trash, dope dealers, the homeless, curious children and fire.

There are thousands of fires in vacant buildings each year in this country. Three in every four of these fires are officially classified suspicious or incendiary. To make matters worse, firefighters are three times as likely to be injured fighting fire in a vacant building as in an ordinary structure fire.

Targeting vacant buildings for fire and arson prevention is the single most effective thing we can do to prevent the threat to firefighters, private citizens and other property. This boils down to securing the building against entry by unauthorized persons. Properly secured, any value it has can be preserved against damage by vandals, the weather and fire.

The first step in the process is to demand action by City Hall to make each vacant building secure by compelling property owners to comply with sensible fire and sanitary code requirements. Using existing civil and criminal penalties in conjunction with government and private redevelopment funding offers the best opportunity we have to control blight and ultimately abandonment.

Make no mistake about this - if the property owner fails or cannot be located the city ultimately has the responsibility to remove the threat. It is often possible to recover any investment by placing a lien on the property. Funding must be found to accomplish this quickly or we risk still another version of what happened in Worcester.

More than half a million fires were deliberately set in America last year, and over half of those fires were set by youngsters and juveniles under the age of 18. Those fires killed more than 500 people and destroyed

about \$2 billion worth of property. Fires in abandoned or vacant buildings played a role in this epidemic.

Firefighters around the country do the very best they can with short budgets and even shorter public attention spans. They are our true heroes, day in and day out. But they can't do it alone and we must not put them in the face of grave danger by doing nothing..

One opportunity to make our own community more aware of the fight against arson begins today. It's called National Arson Awareness Week, and the theme this year is *"It Can Happen Anywhere."*

Gerard Naylis, President of the International Association of Arson Investigators and Tommy Short, President of the International Association of Special Investigation Units, have both said *"The lives and property lost as a result of arson needlessly reduces the quality of life for everyone. The diligence and hard work of both public and private investigators towards the identification and reduction of arson should be recognized and supported by everyone."*

Arson wears many faces. Arson is a troubled kid with the lighter . . . a hate monger with an ax to grind . . . a gang member seeking to prove his toughness . . . an urban disease that eats away at the core of our cities . . . and pestilence that further blights poor rural communities.

Those statistics are frightening-and sobering. National Arson Awareness Week should make all of us perk up our ears and respond to our local fire departments call for community support in the war against arson.

The most effective way of combating arson, of course, is simply to prevent it from happening. That takes more than just federal dollars, it takes bodies of committed people. Everyone in the Greater [insert name of city] area need to get involved in this worthy cause. Working together, we can make real progress in snuffing out a cowardly act that ruins far too many lives in this country.

